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Collecting to the Core — Nature Field Guides

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Column Editor's Note: The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the *Resources for College Libraries* bibliography (online at: <http://www.rclweb.net>). In each essay, subject specialists will introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — **AD**

Nature field guides have long been well represented in the undergraduate library collection in biology, as well as in public libraries, special libraries, and book stores because they allow both professional scientists and amateurs to communicate using standardized names and identification guidelines. Field guides appeal to a wide range of people, have an interesting history, and are making the transition to online access, with major sources now available in electronic editions. This is a natural evolution for this genre, since personal copies of print field guides are often marked with notes and lists of species the user has identified in the wild. This essay addresses some of the canonical and essential field guides that address living organisms, leaving the abundant categories of guides to rocks, minerals, stars, and other objects in nature for other editors and essays to consider.

Skimming the nature section at a bookstore or glancing through search results for "nature field guide" from an online bookseller makes it obvious that such identification books tend to be written for particular groups of plant or animal organisms or for other aspects of nature or natural history. Field guides typically cover a geographic area defined by political or biogeographical boundaries. While most include extensive photographs or detailed illustrations along with descriptive text, the books are often physically small because they are designed to be carried outdoors. Highly specialized guides such as *Orchids of Samoa*,¹ *Acacias of Zimbabwe*,² or *Texas Mushrooms*³ provide both researchers and recreational outdoors people with authoritative guidance about how to identify organisms; however, their narrow scope effectively places them in the "long tail" and renders them largely undesirable in a core collection. More general titles, like the *Sibley Guide to Birds*,⁴ which sold more than 600,000 copies in its first two years of publication, reflect the broad appeal that field guides can have for the general public.⁵

The history and origins of field guides as we think of them today have not been extensively documented. Some authors briefly summa-

rize early bird guides that were accessible to nonspecialists, and many articles and book reviews note the groundbreaking development of **Roger Tory Peterson's** approach to illustrating birds and other natural history topics.^{6, 7, 8} **Sara Scharf** presents a more thorough and interesting overview of field guides' origins in her examination of the way research on the history of identification manuals has been biased toward bird books. **Scharf** shows how the current format of field guides and identification manuals evolved through experimentation, as botanists developed systems to record details including names, physical descriptions, habitats, and illustrations.⁹ Notable among early guides to birds are **Thomas Nuttall's** *Manual of the Ornithology of the United States and Canada*¹⁰ and *Birds Through an Opera Glass*,¹¹ written in 1889 by **Florence Merriam Bailey**. **Roger Tory Peterson's** *A Field Guide to the Birds*,¹² published in 1934, is the precursor to modern bird guides. Notable for the illustration system **Peterson** developed, it provides detailed paintings with arrows denoting physical features to help birders use body shape and distinctive markings to compare and identify species outdoors.

When I assumed responsibilities as the *Resources for College Libraries* (RCL) biology subject editor in 2009, I noticed that out of the 2,300 books and internet resources, the selected field guides needed particular attention. Because RCL aims to be a selective core list of book and electronic resources to support an undergraduate curriculum, the biology section's sample of field guides includes carefully-selected editions of enduring titles that cover North America and/or eastern or western regions of the U.S.; titles focused on narrow subsets of organisms or geographic areas are not appropriate. RCL contains modern classics and reputable series that are relevant to the broad undergraduate curriculum and that would be welcome at any academic library, as well as many public libraries, including the *Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior*,¹³ *Sibley Field Guides to Birds of Western America*,¹⁴ and *Sibley Field Guides to Birds of Eastern America*,¹⁵ as well as selected titles from the *Peterson*, *National Audubon Society*, and *Stokes Field Guide* series. There are numerous other Web-based field guide resources that are indispensable for students and enthusiasts, such as *Audubon's Birds of America* from the **University of Pittsburgh**,¹⁶ *All About Birds* from **Cornell's Lab of Ornithology**,¹⁷ and *eFloras.org* from the **Missouri Botanical Garden** and **Harvard University Herbaria**.¹⁸ By offering expansive coverage of both print and online field guides, RCL's

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selections ensure that collection development librarians can select those materials that will enhance undergraduate students' learning about plants and animals beyond the exposure they might get in biology or ecology classes.

While the above classic and oft-referenced field guides should remain in the library's physical collection to support the curriculum and the broader academic community, field guides for identifying birds, as well as several other categories of living things and natural objects, have become available online in recent years, illustrating another fundamental shift in the format and functionality of guides. Recognizing that field guides are designed to be portable references for naturalists, with the best guides featuring high-quality photographs or illustrations, it seems only natural that the genre has experienced significant online production and is ripe for access via mobile computing devices. Online databases for field information grew along with the huge expanse of the Internet in the 1990s. For example, **Cornell's Lab of Ornithology Birds of North America (BNA)**, which was first released on CD-ROM in 1994 and was completed in 2002, is now fully-accessible by subscription online and offers users extensive species descriptions with high-quality photographs and audio files of birdcalls.¹⁹ In the early 2000s many online files were available containing specialized and general nature field guides, but most were readable only with advanced software like the **Microsoft Access** program, rendering them inaccessible to the typical undergraduate student or outdoor enthusiast. Now, the **National Audubon Society Field Guides (NASFG)** are available online and via mobile applications, requiring only free registration for access to information about more than 5,500 North American species of plants and animals.²⁰ Readers may search for plants or animals by common or scientific names, and the vast descriptive content includes range maps, more than 2,000 bird songs and calls, more than 8,000 photographs, and details about habitat, natural history, behavior, and conservation status. Like the online guides, the apps provide high-quality photographs, range maps, audio clips of animal sounds and bird calls, the ability to create lists of species sighted, and photo albums, as well as easy toggling between images and detailed text descriptions. Another source for online field guides and mobile apps is *eNature.com*, which offers



online information for more than 5,500 plant and animal species, including more than 300 field guides for national parks and wildlife refuges in the United States, guides to wildlife gardening, and options to search for species by geographic area using zip codes.²¹ As mobile access to field guides broadens, it will enable both professionals and amateurs to have a vast array of content available in a portable package that mimics traditional print field guides and provides enhanced options to keep digital notes, upload photographs, and share data with other nature enthusiasts and classmates.

Field guides are an important subset of resources for any library collection whose scope includes biological materials. Academic and public librarians will be wise to select a range of titles that are relevant to their geographic area and particular community interests in ecology and the natural environment. Librarians who purchase nature field guides for their collections obviously must consider the population the library serves and, in the case of academic institutions, the curricula that the collection should support. One valuable source that offers both guidance to assess the field guides in an existing library collection and advice for building such collections is *Guide to Field Guides: Identifying the Natural History of North America*, by **Diane Schmidt**, a librarian at the **University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign**, and the book's companion Website, *International Guide to Field Guides*.^{22, 23} The Website is continuously updated and includes the titles in **Schmidt's** book, as well as guides for geographic areas outside the United States. Further resources for collection development librarians in this subject include **Schmidt's** "Field Guides in Academe," which includes a citation analysis of field guide data, as well as a core list of fifty field guide titles based on citation studies. Another list of recommended field guides for libraries appeared in a *Library Journal* article in 2000.²⁴ While the article is dated, it provides a succinct overview of the nature and purpose of field guides, and most of the recommended titles are still in print or have been published in later editions. The nature field guide titles appearing in the biology section of *RCL* will serve as an important starting place for any college library, while librarians working in academic institutions with extensive biological research programs or in government or other specialized agencies can benefit from consulting the core list of field guides developed by Schmidt to assess their collections and discover field guides appropriate to local geography and research interests. 

Endnotes

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Editor's note: An asterisk () denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries*.